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ABSTRACT

At West Virginia State College, the majority of women one professor teaches are first generation college students who arrive in the classroom full of rich cultural stories. These Appalachian women use what they already know as a frame of reference to explore and process the new material of their teacher education program. As part of the final exam each semester, the students are asked to select and describe a metaphor whose characteristics (as they know them) best fit their perceptions of a classroom. This "exercise in metaphors" provides a way for the students to stretch their thinking and refresh their conventional mindsets about the kind of teacher they hope to become and the kind of classroom they want to design. The responses in this paper present a blend of both past and present experiences as these future teachers revisit the truths of their upbringing to inform and shape their emerging understanding of the teaching and learning process. (Author/SM)

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Our Past Informs the Present: Metaphors and Images of Classrooms

Phoebe M. Levine

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OUR PAST INFORMS THE PRESENT: METAPHORS AND IMAGES OF CLASSROOMS

Phoebe M. Levine, Ph.D.
West Virginia State College

Abstract

At West Virginia State College the majority of women I teach are first generation college students who arrive at my classroom door full of rich cultural stories. And just like all of us, these Appalachian women use what they already know as a frame of reference to explore and process the new material of our teacher education program. As a part of my final exam each semester I ask my students to select and describe a metaphor whose characteristics (as they know them) best fits their perception of a classroom. This "exercise in metaphors" provides a way for my students to stretch their thinking and refresh their conventional mind sets about the kind of teacher they hope to become and the kind of classroom they want to design. The responses in this paper present a rich blend of both past and present experiences as these future teachers revisit the truths of their upbringing to inform and shape their emerging understanding of the teaching and learning process.

Why metaphors?

The origin of the word, metaphor, stems from the Greek word, metapherein revealing one of its root meanings as meta – "to change," and pherein – "to bear." As an educator I am drawn to this notion of using the metaphor as a "change bearing" agent to help my students transform that which they already know into new understandings. A metaphor can become the common ground that sheds light on both the new and old material of our lives. It can bridge the past and present contexts of our daily living. It can provide a framework that supports and shapes the language of our thinking and beliefs. One of my students chose as her metaphor the daily view from her window – ". . . the wild flowers which grace the hillside below my home" (Dixie Thacker). As she named and described the personalities of different flowers, among them poppies, jonquils, daffodils, pansies, and forget-me-nots, her images set the stage for getting in touch with the diverse learning styles and emotional needs that her future students will bring into her classroom each day.

The use of metaphors to enlighten and alter conventional thinking has been adopted by many writers and educators over the years. Mary Belenky (1986) refers to its ability to draw from the wisdom of retrospect and hindsight or seeing through a wide angle lens when she says: "Visual metaphors encourage standing at a distance to get a proper view. . ." (p.18). Another student chose as her metaphor a science experiment and talked about how it allows you to "add new things, but you can never really take things away" (Rene Hill). What a powerful message about how we as teachers must be sensitive to the affective weight our words and actions can bear long after the present moment.

John Dewey (1934) linked this way of knowing with the element of time to touch on another dimension he called "imagination" and defined it as: "The conscious adjustment of the new and the old . . . ", (p.272). Each semester many of those who question my motive for assigning this exercise in metaphor are the same students who surprise themselves with new depths of understanding that stems from the imaginative nature of their response.

Dwayne Huebner (1984) speaks of heightened perception: "The use of metaphor is a way of shedding new light on an already existing phenomena, by looking at and speaking about that phenomena from a totally different perspective. In this way we obtain a transfer of meaning, and thus an opening up of awareness" (p. 112). I recognized this kind of emergent awareness when one of my students compared a classroom to an extended family reunion. She was able to get in touch with the poignant reality of love and belonging alongside acceptance of human imperfection and flaws. Her real experiences with family gatherings were helping her get in touch with her "hoped for" reality of a classroom from an authentic perspective. And her metaphor was helping me remember that my classroom provides a carved-out space and time for a random assortment of personalities to come together and share a sense of belonging, bonded by their desire to be teachers. (Pascale Guillot).

Theory into Practice

During the semester each of my students spends a minimum of forty hours in a public school classroom working side-by-side real students and their teachers. The stories they bring back, fresh from the field, provide the raw material for understanding the research-based methodologies contained in the pages of our textbook. My students draw floor plans of their rooms and write papers about the management styles and strategies they see in use. They reflect on their own past schooling and their own character traits to see how they "fit" with the style of procedures and routines they see in their classrooms. They share all these observations with one another to use as resources for their own future classroom design.

The exercise in metaphors at the end of the semester is simply another extension of this concept of using real experiences as a tool for turning clinical theory into living practice. In her selection of a metaphor, one of my students spoke of the time and ingredients necessary to make and bake a cake "from scratch" (Crickett Martin). An inexperienced or unimaginative cook may be tempted to use a box mix as a shortcut to save time and mess. Even though the resulting cake looks and tastes fine, does the cook fully comprehend and appreciate the nature and blend of the ingredients of his or her "creation?" Do I want my future teachers dependent on and tied to generic kinds of mindless worksheets and "canned" lesson plans with limited understanding of the substance of their teaching process? Do I model risk taking and trial and error learning for my college students in my own teaching? Crickett's metaphor of the cake baker provided fresh and novel imagery that helped me consider important questions about these kinds of practices and priorities in my own teaching.

My original intention with this exercise in metaphors was to broaden my students' concept of what goes on in a classroom, but over the semesters their responses have given me much more! Unlike the multiple-choice, true/false, and short answer assessments to measure what our students have learned in our classes, part of the magic of reading my students' answers to these kinds of non-traditional questions is the gift of my unexpected insights. Just as metaphors work together to shape new meanings, the students' words and my responses to their words create multiple images and playful interpretations. This is the divergent nature of reciprocal dialogue where I find myself responding to my students' past lives, present ideas, and

future hopes. The blend of these kinds of layered conversations produces rich ground for thought and language about teaching.

The Elements of Teaching

The unifying theme of the text I use in my education class focuses on the relationship of three elements that influence the decisions teachers make. An effective teacher must always consider: "How does my teaching best address the needs of context, content, and the learner? What we teach, whom we teach, and under what circumstances: these interrelated variables are the mobiles of all active learning environments. The metaphor exercise draws my students' attention to these basic elements through association with that which they already know.

Over the past semesters my students have come up with a variety of interesting views of the classroom through the metaphors they choose. I've read about kaleidoscopes, snowflakes, circus tents, mountain forests, yard sales, potluck suppers, consumer shopping, interstate highways, and family cookouts – all written against a backdrop of life in a working classroom.

The Heart of the Matter

It is impossible for my students to separate their background from the substance of their thoughts, writings, and actions. I catch glimpses of their hearts when they talk about family and kin. I feel strong ties to a "maw-maw" or "paw-paw" to the extent that it is very hard for many of our graduates to move away from their hollows after graduation, even when they cannot find teaching positions in West Virginia. We have many stories of "first in the family" college graduates. Some days a young child will enter my classroom and sit quietly beside his or her Mom, and I sense that both share the belief that this is an important place to be. I hear my students struggle daily to overcome the nonstandard English dialect they have grown up speaking both at home and in their rural schools.

I have chosen the following metaphors to illustrate the different pictures that emerge when my students bring their particular experiences into the matter of their metaphors. Throughout the semesters I have found that even though my students' writings may not cite specific past events in their lives, the spirit and tone of their words give me many insights into their upbringing and history. As I read and re-read these passages, each time I come away with new understandings about my students and the kind of teachers they will become.

Treasure Hunts

Stephanie Helman, a Science Education major shares her insatiable need for surprise and unplanned discoveries. I steer her to the writings of Eleanor Duckworth (1987) who shares her belief in the magic of "not knowing." Stephanie's metaphor illustrates Duckworth's words that "knowing the right answer requires no decisions, carries no risks, and makes no demands", (p. 64). Perhaps both women could reminisce about their common experiences in growing up.

> Classrooms are like treasure hunts. Each is preceded with great anticipation and planning without guaranteed success. The leader of the

expedition carefully pours over the details that must be tended in order to find a great treasure. Great amounts of study are necessary to create a detailed map, as it will be used to guide others. The map will use landmarks both familiar and new that will lead the expedition towards its ultimate goal. The successful guide will need to consider the make-up, input and findings of his/her crew, overcome obstacles, and constantly adapt to changing environments. All this in hopes of unearthing the hoped-for treasure. . . .

Treasure hunters are mindful that there are no guarantees, however, that the treasure will be at the 'X' or that it will even be as imagined. Sometimes the treasure may be grander than ever expected, it may be made of fool's gold, or it may appear to be a worthless relic only to later be found priceless. It is this thrill of the hunt, the challenge of the unknown, which taunts the treasure hunter to continue searching until all of worth is brought to light.

Cabinet Stew

Another Science Education major, Kathy Calderwood blends the ingredients of her makeshift stew with the random nature of a public school classroom. She welcomes the trial and error mode of some of her past experiences as a framework for building learning communities.

Just like "cabinet stew" is made of many ingredients that come from totally different plants, and different ingredients every time, a classroom's fate lies in the hands of the veggies, spices on hand, and the cook. The stew will consist of vegetables that have been fertilized and cared for and spices that have puny stalks and have never been watered. Even though the ingredients make an unlikely mixture, in the end the cook will make it seem as if it were planned and taste perfect.

Somehow the cook has to get the plump tomato to fit into the mixture, and the overbearing zucchini to stop overpowering the flavor. It seems as if you can spot those spicy peppers right away. If the flame is too high it will cause the stew to boil over and explode onto the stove. If there is no heat the ingredients won't mingle. How do you know? It's just like with real cabinet stew, trial and error. Take what you have and work with it. With time and care all of the ingredients will blend together and become one tasty pot of warm comfort.

Lots of Gardens

When the perennial rituals of her flower beds were disturbed and altered, Kathy Given, Elementary Education major, discovered other varieties that helped her see new possibilities in her old and familiar classroom.

I plant flower beds every spring. I always plant Marigolds, Impatients, and Begonias. I plant these flowers because my mother does and because my

grandmother did. I plant in patterns with repetition. I sometimes get daring and mix up the colors, but the variety never alters. Many classrooms are like this: three levels of students performing the same repetitive tasks day after day. Why is it done this way? Because it always has been.

Last spring I was not home from Arizona until June so as a good deed the Teen Sunday School class planted by beds for me. When I came home I didn't expect much, but I was horrified. My carefully cultivated dirt had been filled with wildflower seed. WEEDS! As the summer wore on my weed patch grew and flowered until I had to admit that it was pretty. The flowers grew taller than I wanted. They were waist high. And they were so full they draped onto my sidewalk. But they were beautiful, and easy to take care of. NO WEEDING! Yeah. I found myself cutting them for friends and myself. Some classrooms are like my "weed beds." They don't force children into a classification but let them grow and be what they are . . . Beautiful.

Elementary Education major, Mary Okin's vegetable garden gives her a rich resource she will use daily to tend to the special needs and gifts of her students.

A classroom is like a vegetable garden in that it takes so much preparation before even the first seed is planted. You must first till and fertilize the soil. It's like a teacher developing a plan. It takes a lot of thought, a lot of creativity, and a lot of organization before the students enter the classroom.

A classroom is like a vegetable garden in that every plant needs special attention and has different requirements. The pole beans need a teepee style frame in order to grow, similar to the student that needs a structured system to be successful. The crooked-neck squash on the other hand like to freely grow and only require a circular fence as their boundary. They are similar to students who will work and create on their own while staying within the limits of the class. The tomatoes grow on a stake but have some pretty big burdens to overcome. They have what are called "suckers" which are limbs that grow but never produce fruit and need to be eliminated. Even the weight of the tomatoes themselves requires the tomato plant to be tied to the stake to hold up its own weight. This is similar to the child who carries too much baggage and can't just be a child. Many times this child depends on the teacher for support that he/she doesn't get elsewhere. The corn grows straight and tall and doesn't have a lot of requirements other than an occasional spraying to keep the worms away, very similar to the high achiever. The pepper plants hold their own and will surprise you with a bit of spice. These may be the mislabeled "underdogs," who win in the end.

A classroom is like a vegetable garden. There are many different personalities represented, and it takes a very dedicated teacher to nurture each plant so that he/she can grow to his/her fullest potential.

Emily Papadopoulos, an English Education major, is a proactive gardener and future teacher whose metaphor mirrors her belief in positive change and opportunity.

> My classroom is like a vegetable garden. As the gardener, it is my job to learn as much as possible about gardening and keep apprised of new developments in plants, fertilizers, and gardening techniques. I must plan, learn from my mistakes each year, and save seeds, as well as take notes in my journal of successes and failures and the conditions, which led to each. Realistically, I must realize that the success of the garden is not entirely within my control. Excessive heat, late frost, insects, and lack of rain can damage the plants. However, I must do everything I possibly can to help my plants and offset these conditions. This might include installing a soaker hose and using insecticides. I believe my extra care will pay off.
>
> My students are like the plants in my garden. They are rich in variety, color, texture, and flavor. Some are very hardy while others need lots of TLC. I must keep weeds out of my rows and try to arrange my garden so different plants can help each other. For example, I plant my corn next to my lettuces so the corn can shade the tender lettuces. I also plant Marigolds and garlic among my tomatoes to keep away insects. Plants can really help each other if the gardener allows and facilitates this. Finally, I recognize that my plants can be important ingredients for many good things. I try ways of growing my plants each year and always rearrange the garden to experiment and maximize the usefulness of the soil

A Trip

As both a mother and Science Education major, Belinda Barker gives us a very practical and realistic picture of life in a classroom.

> Classrooms are like families on a road trip. You have a defined place where you are starting from and a defined goal of where you want to go. Numerous articles are written about how to stave off boredom, keep from killing each other along the way, and find interesting things to do without killing your budget. Prior to starting the trip, it is looked forward to with anticipation. After the trip begins, many just want to get there. The parents (teachers) look at the maps (IGOs, test results), the kids (students) ask over and over, when will this trip be over; when will we get there. I just want to play at Disney World (go to college, have a real life, a car, etc.).
>
> In optimal circumstances, parents (teachers) are excited participants exploring the sites and eagerly learning with their children (students). Regretfully, many parents (teachers) don't understand that this time with their children (students) is a time that can enrich them both. They look at the odometer (assessments) and press relentlessly on toward the end of the trip. Bathroom breaks, snacks, and the trip itself becomes something to be endured rather than explored. The stress of a long trip can numb even the most caring parent to the

needs of their children. It can sometimes be difficult to sing the "Barney" song 5,000 times, clean up yet another can of spilled pop, negotiate who sits in the middle, make him "quit looking at her" or out the other one's window. Resources are used up and patience is worn down. The parent may cease to excitedly anticipate the next experience and just try to make it through to the end of the trip. It might not be possible to finish the trip; they just can't get there from here.

As society we value the road trip, yet many of us know that the trip between the points has many areas where it can be improved. That is why the books are written and why they sell so well. The trip is difficult and the immediate rewards are sometimes difficult to measure. In retrospect we see things we wish that we had done, or things that we have shared and then we are able to decide if the trip was really worth the effort in time, resources and shared experiences to both the parents and the children.

Patchwork Quilt

Lois McPhail, an Elementary Education major reminds us of the holistic nature of the learning community when she shares her love of quilts and the rich family history they hold.

Classrooms are patchwork quilts. Each student is a piece of the quilt, contributing his or her own form of beauty and poise to the whole. All of the pieces are sewn together in a way that they will never lose parts of the whole. Each student is a part of the whole class and will never lose the information learned in a classroom setting. When finished, the quilt is a beautiful piece of art that has been put together and taken care of by a dedicated and caring quilter, because as we all know, quilting takes time, just as an education takes time to receive. The teacher is the quilter. The quilter is caring, patient, and dedicated to bringing all of her pieces together until they are perfect. Though each piece has its flaws and problems, each piece also has some aspect of perfection that deserves to be included.

A classroom is full of students who all have different abilities and advantages. Though some may not be perfect, they all have something to contribute and share. The teacher is the one who brings out these abilities and beauty. The teacher brings all of the abilities and disabilities together so they can benefit one another. As a quilt shall be continuously taken care of so as not to fall apart, a child's education must be taken care of and maintained so it will not be lost.

My Studio

Several years ago, Patti Groves, an Elementary Education major, submitted what is now a well worn metaphor that I return to often to remind me that I am responsible for giving my best to these precious lives who have been placed in my care for only a short time.

Every autumn, about twenty to twenty-five people drop off a piece of art for me to highlight, detail, frame, and/or repair in my studio. I work on their pieces about thirty hours a week until spring except for Christmas and Easter breaks. When you visit my studio, you will notice all the pieces are unique and different. You will also notice that what I do to each piece is very different. Of course, it has to be this way.

Every piece demands me to evaluate its needs to become a well-developed masterpiece. It is really queer that some of the owners never stop by the studio to see what I'm doing to their treasure. They just trust my judgment no matter what I do. There are others that question my every stroke and ask why. Often they disagree. Then, there are those owners that you wish everyone was like. They appreciate my style and want to know what they can do to enhance the beauty of their piece. It seems like these pieces always seem to have a slight edge on the others. The pieces that require so much of my whole being are the damaged ones. I have only run into a few. Sometimes, it is impossible to cover up the rips or snags. Often, I spend extra time on these pieces. However, the articulate viewer can still spot the scar.

This is a job that I love and really hope to be successful. I know that my nine months with each piece is only a moment in a lifetime. Yet, I hope that I add beauty and worth to every piece that will never be taken away. It is hard every June to hand those pieces of art over their owners. Of course I'll possibly see those pieces again. Yet, I know next fall, they will be in someone else's studio; and I will have some new pieces to work on. It is this sense of such a short time with each piece I have the opportunity to texture that helps me to realize how I need to always offer my best.

Crossroads and Bridges

The Appalachian women I teach are possibly no different from other women across our nation, or in fact, around the world. We all must wait for time to sharpen the focus of our old pictures and define new images in our lives. The metaphor becomes a timely connecting tool that bridges past to present, helping all of us select paths that alter our thinking and spark our passion for the teaching and learning process.

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